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Romanian folk literature in our classes: a proposal for the development of intercultural competence

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Abstract

The present research highlights the ways in which folk literature, this valuable tool that contributes to students' formation from both a human and literary perspective, can promote intercultural competence in class and foster a better integration within the community, while consolidating favorable attitudes towards interculturality. We share Rodríguez Almodóvar's view (2009), according to which the folk story makes the geographic space expand; it channels affectivity, while guiding the learning process towards the acceptance of social values that are representative for each culture.

The objectives of our study are focused, on the one hand, on improving intercultural competence among students, through a detailed analysis of the typical motifs in Romanian folk literature. What the analysis aims to prove is their similarity to those pertaining to other literatures. On the other hand, this endeavor is meant to promote the intracultural and intercultural values of the Romanian student body that is being formally educated in our classes, by allowing them to get to know their own culture, as well as the culture of the new space they inhabit (destination culture).

The present paper proposes as a conclusion the idea that if we took a closer look at the motifs contained in any country's folk literature, we would be able to link them together, by means of similarity, which would greatly facilitate coexistence during classes.

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1. Introduction

One of the main objectives comprised within the linguistic policies of the European Council and the European Commission is to promote plurilingualism, mainly through the contact between languages and cultures, which is a key element in the construction and development of the intercultural competence. In this increasingly globalized era, intercultural communication is a process that leads to the cultural globalization (Sorrells, 2012) of a “world in motion” (Inda & Rosaldo, 2001: 11) in which persons with diverse linguistic backgrounds must become adapted to a new community, one that is defined by the terms “unity in diversity” (Solé, Alcalde, Lurbe & Parella, 2002). Thus, the importance of language-learning is highlighted and the plurilingual and pluricultural competences of students in our classes are highly valued as a means of forging their own identity. Consequently, folk literature represents an essential tool for intercultural education, a necessary step towards recognizing and comprehending one’s history, one’s roots and the unique symbols that form a nation’s identity. Along similar lines, Morote (2010: 58) pinpoints the intercultural function of oral folk literature:

We could still add an *intercultural function* (oral folk literature makes it possible to fight against racial or ethnical discrimination, to encourage respect for human diversity and to reflect upon the common ground that makes us unite as human beings).

In folk literature, stories use the classical Horatian principle *instruct and delight* and gradually build new learning routes that arise as a consequence of the child’s need for emotional structure. Thus, we share Rodríguez Almodóvar’s opinion (2009) that the folk story makes the geographic space expand by creating bridges between different cultures and nations, it channels affectivity and promotes a higher acceptance of each nation’s social values:

...there is some sort of timeless universal, a common symbolic material that is seemingly embedded in our human condition. When, with the help of the professor, he would «discover», for instance, a folk story that he could have encountered in a familiar environment, but was already mentioned and collected by Afanasiev in Russia, half a century before, his astonishment would be boundless. This would be the perfect context for him to understand plenty of other things, such as the absurdity of xenophobic behavior, the ties of cultural solidarity between nations, respect for distinctive traits, etc. (p. 26).

Considering that folk literature plays an active and important part in promoting intercultural competence and cultural enrichment, the goals and objectives of this study could be efficiently summarized in the following lines:

- to develop the intercultural competence among students, though a detailed analysis of the motifs that appear in Romanian folk literature;
- to foster intracultural and intercultural values of Romanian students by allowing them to get to know their own culture, as well as the culture of the new space they inhabit (destination culture).

2. Romanian Folk Literature in a Universal Context

Romanian folk literature displays an array of universal themes and motives, some of them so old that their antiquity can be qualified as mythical. Romanian tales are sometimes ancient short novels or magical stories in which millenary moral observations are being analyzed (Calinescu, 1965). It is worth mentioning that Romanian stories are characterized by the presence of humanized fantastic elements, where animals and supernatural beings are portrayed as characters, each with their own ideas and mentalities that belong to «rural realism». The origins of the fantastic elements can be traced back to reality, which is shown in form of allegories; they are transposed figures of nature, of social life and human personality (Vianu, 1965). Humans and animals are the protagonists of various worlds that come together, mixing real and imaginary elements within a “self-generated language that is also the main source of the fantastic, inside the text in itself” (Belaval, 1976: 53). Romanian folk tales employ realistic elements that are typical for the Romanian life, reflecting the nation’s particular way of thinking and feeling, [a nation] whose motives go on to forming part of the universal literature (Vianu, 1965). Yet the difference lies only in the setting; they are the same universal motives, which the Romanian culture has

transposed in order to reflect its particular features, preserved through a deep understanding of tradition and the values of folklore.

3. Participants and Tools

Before delving any deeper into the motifs of the selected Romanian stories, we must point out that, in choosing the sample, a case study was conducted, resulting in the choosing of seven stories whose informants all originate from the Romanian region of Moldavia. Five of them are women and two of them are men, whose age varies between 24 and 68, thus covering the scientific requirements of variety regarding age and sex.

The correspondence between the selected folk stories and their informants is as follows:

INFORMANT	TITLE
Marinela Miclescu	<i>Práslea the Brave and the Golden Apples</i>
Ileana Ifteni	<i>The Story of Harap Alb</i>
Camelia Albisteanu	<i>The Bear Tricked By The Fox</i>
Alin Calin	<i>The Goat and Her Three Kids</i>
Suduc Luciana	<i>The Goat Kid and the Three Goats</i>
Bordeianu Petronela	<i>The Story of the Pig</i>
Mihail Albisteanu	<i>Youth Without Old Age and Life Without Death</i>

Therefore, a first contact with the participants was established, covering general information about the research theme and the characteristics of the stories that were to be recorded. It should be stated that each subject's tale was recorded separately, with a range of duration between 15 and 30 minutes each. A tape recorder was used in order to record the stories and facilitate their subsequent transcription and translation.

4. Motifs in Romanian Folk Literature

4.1. Themes

One of the key elements for achieving intercultural value when it comes to folk literature resides in the themes and how they are being treated. Effectively, studying them allows us to corroborate the existence of a common, collective imaginary, similar to human nature and that prevails in all cultures:

Oral literature represents the most intimate and direct expression of men and women whose roots are deeply grounded in countryside tradition, people who are able to get something across to us: their thoughts, feelings, ideas, actions, their vital concerns, the religious and magical beliefs, the festive rites, the games, the stories, the tales... most of which, in all their lexical and semantic variety, are much alike those in all cultures. Traditional literature surpasses space and time and, despite social changes, the different cultures and civilizations preserve and maintain the traditions of times past.

The first theme to tackle is death, the ultimate representation of fear in all societies. The history of mankind, as well as folk literature offer an infinite number of examples in which man's fight against death is bound to reach an inevitable conclusion. As expected, death always prevails:

Then he grabbed a mirror and saw that his hair was white. His once black hair was now white and his face had wrinkles (...) „I'm glad you came. Had you waited any longer, you wouldn't have found me.” It was Death, waiting to take him to his grave (*Youth Without Old Age and Life Without Death*).

Another theme that appears repeatedly in the selected folk tales is that of family, whose cohesive value as a symbol of social structure is also common throughout all cultures. Perpetuating the family's unity serves, among

other purposes, to preserve the integrity of the weakest links, the youngsters. And to that effect, fear is reinstated:

In all the world's literature and folklore, there is a vast amount of dark, shady characters that are meant to induce panic, especially among young children. This fear is superstitiously passed on to the world of the grown-ups and their traditions (Callejo, 1998: 28).

This is precisely what happens in the tale entitled *The Goat and Her Three Kids*; the mother warns them not to open the door to strangers when they are alone, not unless they hear the familiar song she used to sing to them, but the wolf manages to trick them and devours the two older brothers:

Mother goat returned home and couldn't find her kids, but the youngest came out through the chimney and, after seeing her, he said: "Mom, mom, the wolf came and ate my brothers". Heartbroken, the goat promised her remaining son that she wouldn't leave things as they were and she would find a way to get revenge.

The moral of the story is crystal-clear: kids must obey their parents, as reaffirmed in the story's ending: «Afterwards, the goat remained by her son's side forever and they lived happily ever after. The little goat closely followed his mother's advice in everything, ever since».

In accordance to this last example, the educational value of folk literature is emphasized in tales such as *The Goat Kid and the Three Goats*. The little goat is excessively spoiled by the three goats. But one day the three goats had to go somewhere and the little goat was forced to learn how to fend for himself:

The next day, when the goats had already returned, the little goat woke up in the morning, he got dressed all by himself and ate without anyone helping him, and this is how the little goat started to do things all by himself. And he lived happily ever after.

4.2. *The characters*

The first thing that comes to our attention when analyzing the characters of these folk tales is the remarkable presence of the institution of monarchy, whose objective is to reinforce the already established social hierarchy. The typology within the list of characters is diverse: animals or witches bearing different actantial functions (although most of the times they play the villain's part):

(...) the «antagonists» of almost every tale are usually a handful of characters: the stepmother, the witches and the giant ogres. Curiously enough, they are the only ones representing Nature's dark side. Occasionally, this role is attributed to certain known animals, such as the fox or the wolf, or unknown beasts, such as the dragon or the cuélebre (Callejo, 1998: 59-60).

Witches do tend to have a predictable actantial function; they are mostly seen as opponents and, in consequence, end up being discovered and killed. «The witch was tied up to the mare's tail, along with a sack of walnuts and then they gave the mare a whipping so that it would run really fast, and thus the witch was dead».

Finally, we can add that the characters whose presence is most prominent are generally animals. This is due to the fact that most folk literature is based on fables, as is the case in the stories that have a moral component.

For instance, in the story entitled *The Bear Tricked By The Fox*, the latter is a symbol of cunning, instilling fear in anyone and anything that comes close to it. A similar function is performed by the wolf, in *The Goat and Her Three Kids*. This is the type of animals Callejo (1998) refers to:

On other occasions, **Animals** are used to frighten children, a variety of animals ranging from the most phantasmagorical and unreal to common, well-known ones, such as the fox, which appears under numerous denominations (p.32).

4.3. *The element of the fantastic*

Taking into consideration the fact that fantastic elements are present in all of the stories that were analyzed, once again it is confirmed that folkway resorts to magic and the supernatural in order to favor the protagonists and enable them to reach their goals. Sure enough, except for one occasion, in the story entitled *Práslea the Brave and*

the *Golden Apples*, where the dragon stole the king's golden apples and ate them, the rest of the fantastic characters are, in fact, helpers:

Harap Alb (...) met some people that would become his companions: Wide and Long Birdman, Eyeman, Eat-it-all man and Drink-it-all man. Birdman could stretch out and reach the moon, Eat-it-all could eat everything he got his hands on, Drink-it-all could drink all the liquids he could find.

Another element that we must point out is the presence of horses who, besides helping their masters, have other things in common: they tap into their powers by eating ashes that presents magical attributes are related to the sacred power of ancestors (Evseev, 1994) and, most importantly, they talk:

The horse that he had selected talked to him and told him: „You won't regret choosing me, the only thing that you have to do is feed me ashes". The king's son offered him the ashes and the horse turned into a big, strong stallion that was able to talk and give him sound advice.

The old father (...) told him that he had to choose, from the stable, a horse that would eat ashes. Upon arriving at the stable, he gave the ashes to the horses, but none of them would eat. The prince was worried, because he didn't know which horse to choose. In the end, a skinny mare came close to him and ate the ashes, turning instantly into a really strong stallion that could even speak. Seeing this, the prince realized that this was the horse he was waiting for.

4.4. The social function

In the previous sections, we came to the conclusion that in the majority of the cases, the folk literature sample that we selected complies with a specific function: to maintain the previously established social structures. To this, we must add the progenitors' educational and protective function: witches, ogres, dragons or foxes are employed by the parents in order to protect their children from the dangers that await them. Nevertheless, except for the tale entitled *The Bear Tricked By The Fox*, in which cunning overcomes goodness, throughout the present study we weren't able to find a third function that folk literature is said to occupy within the culture that consumes it, that is the assertive function, one which transgresses the established order of things (Devís, 2014).

Bascom reflects upon the functions of folklore and points out that it serves, among other things, to react against the norms imposed by a culture and, at the same time, to validate it; to accomplish the task of maintaining an attitude of conformism among its members; to educate, as well, to pass on knowledge, values and norms of conduct (Oriol, 2002: 32).

5. Conclusions

The present research has been a useful tool in identifying how folk literature, has the ability to develop intercultural competence and link together different spaces and cultures. In this sense, we have performed a thorough analysis of the different motifs appearing in some Romanian folk literature tales, most of which were precisely cut out to fit the educational and moral values of the society that generated them. Our aim was to examine and reflect upon those themes which were also present in other universal cultures.

Thus, we acknowledge the paramount importance of teaching others how to narrate: it is a vital pursuit, that of training individuals which are able to value their own culture and the culture of their place of arrival. This is a first step towards promoting intracultural and intercultural values that will, in turn, provide the basis for the proper functioning of the learning mechanisms, in accordance to the students' maturity.

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